

# **Management: Theoretical, practical, or conceptual?**

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## **Summary**

Utilising a case study research strategy, qualitative data and inductive reasoning this research has investigated the appropriation of ideas, theories, concepts and models by management practitioners.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which were modelled upon the critical incident technique, to examine whether management practitioners made direct, conscious and overt references to academic scholarship when addressing their organisational challenges. Subsequently the insights of 'intertextuality' and the framework analysis technique were utilised to examine whether the process of appropriation might be a much more sub-conscious, subtle or covert phenomenon.

It has been concluded (i) that management can be characterised as a conceptual discipline; (ii) that it is at least as conceptual, as it is either theoretical or practical and (iii) that at the heart of the management experience is the appropriation of ideas and concepts, rather than theories and models.

## Introduction

The first significant book on the topic of business and management was Frederick W. Taylor's 'Scientific management' (Kennedy, 1998). However, by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the market for books on the subject of business and management had grown to more than 3,000 new books a year and the total annual value of business and management book sales was considered to be £700 million (Alvarez, Mazza & Mur (1999: 114). In addition, it was estimated that there were at least 30,000 business books in print (Pfeffer & Sutton 2006: 33).

This general picture of a burgeoning intellectual interest in business and management towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is confirmed by Thomson (2001: 102) who concludes both that 'management was not an area of academic analysis for most of the last century' and that 'not until the 1960s did any serious analysis start in the universities'.

In fact The Tuck School of Business, which was founded in 1900 and is part of Dartmouth College, in America provided the first graduate school of business. However, the growth in the academic study of business and management has been such that The Global Foundation for Management Education (2008: 26 & 27) conservatively estimated, that on a worldwide basis; there were at least 13.2 million students of business and management; that there were at least 8,000 business schools and that the annual expenditure on university level business and management education was at least US \$15 billion. At the time this would have equated to around £27 billion.

Thus, the exponential growth, both in the market for books on business and management and in the market for the academic study of business and management, would seem to imply an increasingly significant role for the more formal, more academic ideas, theories, concepts and models about the practice of management.

However, Thomson (2001: 102) concludes both that 'management in Britain has been an empirical and instrumental, rather than an intellectual occupation' and that 'pragmatism rather than theory has been the basis of progress'. In addition, there are other academics who share Thomson's pessimism regarding both the impact and the influence of academic theorising upon the practice of management (Daft & Wiginton, 1979; Mintzberg & Gosling, 2002; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Mintzberg, 2004; Pearce, 2004).

Furthermore, within academia there is a longstanding and seemingly unresolved debate regarding whether it is axiomatic that research, undertaken with appropriate levels of academic rigour, will always suffer from a lack of practical relevance (Schon, 1983; Svejenova & Alvarez, 1999; Weick, 2001; Starkey & Madan, 2001; Aram & Salipante, 2003; Mintzberg, 2004; Rousseau, 2006; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006; Kieser & Leiner, 2009; Fincham & Clark, 2009; Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009).

Finally, the scholarship regarding management itself appears to involve a series of intense and unresolved debates as to (i) whether management can be regarded as a 'science', or an 'applied science' (Moore, 1970; Schein, 1973; Mintzberg, 2004); (ii) whether management can be effectively taught via business schools and academic qualifications such as an MBA (Bailey & Ford, 1996; Nohria & Eccles, 1997, Pfeffer &

Fong, 2002; Daft & Wiginton, 1979; Pearce, 2004); or (iii) whether it is a 'craft' that is learnt through an individuals active involvement in a 'community of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Orr, 1996).

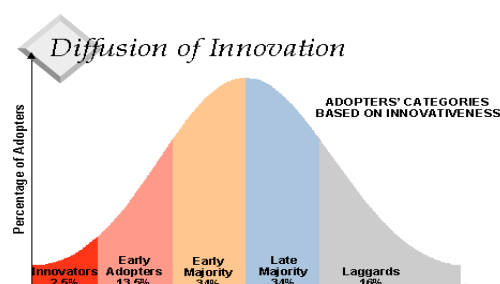
In the light of the contradictory evidence this research sought to ascertain whether the generality of management practitioners appropriate the more formal, more academic ideas, theories, concepts and models about management in any meaningful way and assuming that they did, the extent to which they did so. In addition, it sought to establish the fundamental nature of the processes of appropriation and the factors that determined whether an appropriation process was successful. Furthermore, it sought to establish the role that ideas, theories, concepts and models, once appropriated, played in helping managers to discharge their organisational responsibilities.

## Literature review

An initial exploration of relevant scholarship highlighted both the 'diffusion of innovations' (Rogers, 1962) and 'fashion theory' (Abrahamson, 1991 & 1996; Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999).

Everett M. Rogers has produced the definitive, encyclopaedic review of more than 4,000 studies that constitute the body of knowledge that has come to be described as the innovation – diffusion literature. Diffusion theory is often understood in relation to the diffusion of technical innovations. In fact Rogers (2003: 12) adopted both a broad definition of an innovation and a broad description of its applicability. This specifically includes the diffusion of new ideas.

However, the roots of diffusion theory lie in the Ryan & Gross (1943) study of the uptake of a new hybrid corn seed in rural Iowa, USA and it was these two researchers who first used the term 'diffusion'. Rogers' initial contribution to 'diffusion theory' was to show that the S-shaped adopter curve, which had been produced by Ryan & Gross, closely followed that of a normal distribution. This allowed Rogers to divide the curve into a number of sub-categories which he then used to categorise the adopter population into five, broad, generic types. Hence, the core of the Rogers' categorisation system divides the normal distribution curve into four parts by utilising both the mean and the standard deviation. The area lying to the extreme left of the curve is then sub-divided by utilising the mean and two standard deviations. Accordingly Rogers' adopter categorisations are a purely statistical phenomenon.



Source : <http://cq-pan.cqu.edu.au/david-jones/Reading/Adoption/onweb/adopters.gif>

Accessed 30 July 2009

However, from a broader perspective, diffusion theory is dependent upon a number of assumptions that are problematic and the theory also contains a number of other limiting characteristics. Firstly, it is clear that the overall approach of the diffusion of innovations model incorporates a 'center - periphery bias' (Schon, 1971). This reflects the origins of the model and both the fact that the new seed corn was developed by a government agency and the fact that subsequently the new seed corn was diffused to local farmers through this agency (Rogers, 2003). If this model of diffusion is translated to the setting of ideas about management, it would imply the need for centralised 'think tanks' to develop and perfect ideas about management prior to their diffusion to practitioners. Although business schools could be suggested as being these centralised 'think tanks', it would be necessary to subsequently demonstrate that in practice they fulfilled this role. In addition, for the diffusion of innovations model to be potentially applicable to a management setting it would also be necessary to demonstrate that there were effective channels of diffusion and communication from the centralised 'think tanks' and to the practitioner community. In fact there is an overwhelming weight of evidence to confirm that such channels do not exist (Bailey & Ford, 1996; Nohria & Eccles, 1997; Thomson, Storey, Mabey, Thomson, Gray & Farmer, 1998; Svejenova & Alvarez, 1999; Kieser, 2002; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Rynes, Brown & Colbert, 2002; Mintzberg, 2004; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006; Forster, 2007). In addition, there is evidence that practitioners themselves are the creators of the majority of management innovations, rather than any presumed 'think tank' (Mol & Birkinshaw, 2008).

Of equal importance is the fact that the adopter S-curve, upon which the diffusion of innovations model is based, is an 'after-the-fact' phenomenon that exists only for those innovations that completely diffuse (Rogers, 1958). Accordingly the model has no predictive capability and in addition, it is unable to explain why poor innovations diffuse and good ones do not (Abrahamson, 1991 & 1996). Finally, the model has a 'pro-innovation bias' which assumes that all innovations have a beneficial impact (Downs & Mohr, 1976; Kimberly, 1981; Rogers & Schoemaker, 1971; Van de Ven, 1986; Zaltman, Duncan & Holbeck, 1973).

In fact the 'fashion-setting' theory developed initially by Abrahamson (1991, 1996) and later by Abrahamson & Fairchild (1999) was a direct response to the inability of Rogers' classical diffusion theory to explain why some ineffective ideas about management appeared to successfully diffuse, whilst some apparently effective ideas, did not.

However, 'fashion-setting' theory aligns managerial fashion with aesthetic fashion; and in so doing it assumes that both aesthetic fashion and managerial fashion are the product of 'fashion-setters'. Furthermore, in relation to the apparently fashionable patterns in ideas about management, the role of 'fashion-setters' is assigned to consulting firms; management 'gurus'; business mass media publishers; business schools; book editors and publishers; ghost-writers; conference organisers and video production companies (Abrahamson, 1996). In a later development the notion of a 'fashion-niche' was introduced. Each organisational 'fashion-niche' is viewed as containing managerial challenges of such significance that there is the continuous need for new and improved management techniques. However, such organisational 'fashion-niches' are assumed, but not demonstrated to exist (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999).

Fashion-setting theory raises concerns because it can be seen as overstating the power of discourse and oratory and because it also assigns to practitioners a role that can be viewed as being both passive and a gullible (Clark & Salaman, 1998; Clark, 2003; Clark & Greatbatch, 2004; Mazza, Alvarez & Comas, 2001). This is not a view of managers that is supported by other literature, particularly that which is associated with leadership. This suggests that managers are 'sagacious, forceful and extremely skilful at analysing highly complex situations' and that in the light of this contrast, 'the traditional exploitation thesis of managers by consultant gurus needs to be reassessed' (Heller, 2002: 260 & 266). Fashion-setting theory can also be seen as ignoring the evidence that trends in aesthetic fashion can and do occur by processes such as 'contagion' (Gladwell, 2000; Granovetter, 1978; Granovetter & Soong, 1983), or even 'swarm intelligence' (Beni & Wang, 1989), rather than through the efforts of 'fashion-setters'. In addition, fashion theory, like diffusion theory, is contrary to the evidence that practitioners themselves are the creators of the majority of management innovations (Mol & Birkinshaw, 2008).

A key methodological deficiency with Abrahamson's central proposition, that management is subjected to fashionable trends, is that citation analysis is used as a proxy for detailed, primary information regarding managerial practice. Indeed the Creation of European Management Practice: Final Report, (2001: 31) highlights the concern that investigations into 'the succession of different management fashions' are usually 'based upon an examination of management literature rather than on actual management practice'. In addition, Worren (1996: 613) cites evidence that contrary to Abrahamson's central proposition, managerial practices are 'surprisingly stable and not particularly faddish'.

Thus, although Rogers' 'diffusion of innovations theory' and Abrahamson's 'fashion-setting theory' both make a significant contribution it is clear that they provide only a partial, or perhaps a particular, explanation for the appropriation of ideas, theories, concepts and models by management practitioners.

In addition, as has already been discussed, the scholarship regarding the researching, teaching and learning of management as a formal, academic subject has highlighted a number of intense and seemingly unresolved debates, rather than clarity and certainty.

It is the equivocal, ambiguous and even contradictory nature of the evidence regarding the appropriation of ideas, theories concepts and models that this research has sought to resolve.

## **Methodology and methods**

This research has adopted a research philosophy of 'realism' and it has utilised a case study research strategy, qualitative data and inductive reasoning to examine whether management practitioners appropriate the more formal, more academic ideas about management in a direct, obvious and overt way.

The complete data set for both the case studies and the subsequent 'intertextual' analysis was formed by the verbatim transcripts of two sets of semi-structured recorded interviews. The first involved 24 face to face interviews conducted with established,

senior managers from five different organisations, representing all sectors of the economy. Each of the interviewees was a senior manager working within established, rather than emergent, organisations with a minimum size of 200 people and with personal responsibility for a team of at least 10 people. In addition, each had been exposed to either formal management education, including at masters level, or programmes of management training and development. The second involved 15 telephone interviews conducted with similarly experienced, similarly established and similarly senior practitioners, who were also in the midst of part-time study for an MBA. The purpose of this difference was to explore the possibility that the process of appropriation and the scale and nature of any theoretical influence might vary according to features, such as the timescale between appropriation and any subsequent usage.

The structure of the interviews was based upon the critical incident technique and within each interview individuals were invited to identify both their most significant managerial challenges and the approach that they had taken to address each of these. In the light of the information that had been obtained, the interviewees were then invited to comment upon the role that the more formal, more academic ideas, theories, concepts and models about management had played in the process. The 39 semi-structured, recorded interviews lasted a total of 34 hours 53 minutes; provided information in relation to 160 critical incidents and the verbatim transcripts totalled 355,000 words.

The case study data analysis was conducted in accordance with the processes and procedures outlined by Eisenhardt (1989) and this included both a 'within case' and a 'cross case' analysis. In practice each of the interview transcripts was subjected to an intense inspection process. This resulted in sections of the dialogue being highlighted and extracted into a separate compilation for a more detailed examination. Ultimately 888 interview extracts were attributed to one of ten evidential categories, such as evidence for experience based decision – making.

Subsequently, the research utilised the insights of 'intertextuality' (Worton & Still, 1990; Bernstein, 1996; Allen, 2000; Thomas, 2003; Bazerman, 2004) to explore, analyse, categorise and index (Richards & Richards, 1994) additional extracts from the verbatim, interview transcripts. The purpose of this was to examine whether management practitioners appropriated the more formal, more academic ideas about management in a much more covert, subtle, tacit or even subconscious way. This latter stage of the data analysis utilised the framework analysis technique (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994; Pope, Zeland & Mays, 2000; Ritchie, Spencer & O'Connor, 2003; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

This 'intertextual' data analysis process involved the further identification of words, phases and expressions that were of potential interest. In simple terms the basis for the identification of these extracts was that they were viewed as 'standing out' in some way against the 'background noise' of the overall sentence. Within the limits of manageability the extraction process aimed to be as inclusive as possible and this is illustrated by the fact that ultimately this collation totalled 1447 interview extracts. The table below illustrates the indexing process and in addition, the illustrative extracts are shown both with an explanation for the indexing rationale and within their context.

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Table 1 : Illustration of ‘intertextual’ indexing process

Theoretical Domain	Conceptual Domain	Tactical Domain	Practical Domain
Action centred leadership			
A reference to the leadership model, involving task, team and individual, developed by John Adair firstly at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst and subsequently at The Industrial Society during the 1960's and the early 1970's.			
[Details omitted] definitely I remember, and the course I did on the second week I became a manager for the first time, which was at [details omitted], which was, I think it was just called Introduction to Managing People or Introduction to Management. And it was the ... um ... <b>action centred leadership</b> model.			
Encouraging the heart			
A reference to the leadership model, involving inspiring shared vision, modelling the way, challenging the process, enabling others to act and encouraging the heart developed by James M Kouzes & Barry Z Posner.			
So we've got our five practices ... um ... so you've got your inspiring shared vision, you've got the modelling the way, you've got the challenging the process ... you've got the enabling others to act and then the <b>encouraging the heart</b> piece.			
	Champion		
A reference to influential individuals whose backing can ensure that a project or invention gets a chance to prove itself. A finding of Peters' and Waterman's, In Search of Excellence was that organisations that nurtured champions were more likely to qualify as excellent.			
And so on Friday we started the session and said look guys, look at this agenda, its horrendous, the pressure we're all under, so, how are we, together, going to sort it out. Who's going to <b>champion</b> that bit, because I can't, we can't, whose going to <b>champion</b> that bit, what are we going to do about this.			
	Empowerment		
A reference to the increased participation of employees in the enterprise for which they work. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, a former editor of the Harvard Business Review, is a leading exponent of empowerment as an aid to releasing forces for innovation and change. Also an interdisciplinary intertextual reference to the ritual in Tibetan Buddhism which initiates a student into a particular tantric deity practice.			
Um ... I suppose it goes back to some of the points you've made about partly, ... um ... using somebody who's closer to the, the actual day to day ins and outs of the, the work. Um ... sharing responsibility, ... um ... <b>empowerment</b> , I don't know if that's answering the point you're making but I, I think it, its easy to think that, as I'm the manager, I need to know it all or I should demonstrate to the rest of my team that I know it all.			
		Segment	
A reference to a subgroup of people or organizations sharing one or more characteristics that cause them to have similar product and / or service needs. A true market segment is distinct from other segments, is homogeneous within the segment; responds similarly to a market stimulus, and can be reached by a market intervention.			
So our business is split, as you probably know, into the various different markets and customers that we serve, and we <b>segment</b> that according to ... um ... like customers and like markets.			
		Turnkey	
A reference to a form of business transaction in which a contractor is responsible for a project from construction through to commissioning. However it may also include follow on activities such as training, logistical, and operational support.			
[Details omitted], who are engineering consultants and they're supervising, they should be supervising the work and project managing the delivery so I'm actually supposed to be acting as a light touch project manager with ... er ... a <b>turnkey</b> approach from our consultants to do everything, I think is the phrase (laugh).			
			Managing by exception
A reference to a means of ensuring that the management of an organisation devotes its time to dealing with those aspects of its operations where the performance differs significantly from that which was intended.			
So the challenge has been really project managing them to make sure that they do what they are being charged to do, compared with the other pressures that they're under, of course. Um ... so broadly speaking it's been an overall type of Prince Two management approach by <b>managing by exception</b> .			
			Scorecard
An intertextual reference to 'balanced scorecard' which is a means of providing an overview the measures that both influence and underlie an organisations performance. The core rationale being that the financial outcomes will always 'lag behind' these indicators and will be determined by them. Developed by Art Schneiderman of Analog Devise in 1987, the approach was included in lectures given by Robert Kaplan at Harvard Business School. Subsequently written about by Robert Kaplan & David Norton, during the 1990's, in both the Harvard Business Review and a book.			
I meet with each of those facilities on a regular basis, for specifics that we're looking at, but formally, on a monthly basis, at a <b>scorecard</b> meeting when we look at the ... um ... performance of their facility against a set of benchmark matrix that all facilities around the globe are measured against.			

### Key discoveries

This research has found that even in relation to their most significant managerial challenges the more formal, more academic theories and models about management exerted little, if any, overt influence over the interviewees. Indeed, even in the most challenging of circumstances their first recourse was to their expert recognition



processes. Within the transcripts the kind of words that the interviewees used to describe this were experience, instinct, experiential, common sense, subconscious, intuitive, informal, reactive, immediate and practical.

“Instinct is a word”.	[M1W7]
“I think its intuition”.	[M1W5]
“Blindingly obvious”.	[M2W1]
“Common sense”.	[M2W1]
“Gut instinct”.	[M2H1]
“Years of experience”.	[M2H3]

Where recognition processes failed to provide an immediate way forward the interviewees would utilise a fairly chaotic process of self reflection, deconstruction and reconstruction. By this means the interviewees would seek to build an approach that had the potential to address their concerns. Within the transcripts the kinds of words that the interviewees use to describe this were gradual, evolving, discovering, emergent and considered. Where appropriate, this process of reflection and gradual discernment would be combined with ‘trial and error’ implementation. By this means, an incremental approach would be taken towards implementation and a whole range of hard and soft measures would be used both to monitor and to determine progress. At least initially, the criteria for success could be very small, including that the situation that was of concern should deteriorate no further.

“I mean, the big influence for me is the ability to reflect”.	[O1I1]
“I can’t read any paper without relating something in it back to work, even when I’m relaxing at the weekend”.	[O2I5]
“I do spend a lot of time, when I’m not at work, thinking about it”.	[O3I2]
“I spend a lot of time thinking about work and I sort of bed it down, I almost put it into geological strata”.	[O5I2]
“So it would be impossible for me not to be thinking about work when I’m outside the workplace environment”.	[O5I4]

“I was up at three o’clock this morning thinking about it”.

[O3I4]

For a significant minority of the interviewees, their emergent, decision-building approach to identifying a way forward, involved the application of a clear set of personal values which they used both as a compass to steer by and as a means of ruling out some potential approaches.

“A lot of it is a personal value”.

[O2I2]

“I’ll talk more about work when there’s a, ... er ... something that’s against my principles or values”.

[O2I2]

“That probably stems from my father, to be honest with you. It’s just in the beliefs that, that he’s given me ... um ... and the way you treat people. I suppose, yeah, I suppose I’ve learned a lot from him”.

[O4I3]

“It’s more personal I suppose, but it’s from ... um ... my Mum and Dad in a way”.

[O5I2]

“I very much will treat people how I would be expected to be treated”.

[M1W7]

“Oh, I suppose, ethics, I don’t know. That’s ... oh... I never thought about that. I guess everybody has values ... um ... and ... um ... everybody somehow knows what’s right or wrong”.

[M1O1]

Where recognition, personal reflection, gradual discernment and the application of personal values failed to identify a viable approach, the interviewees turned to their fellow practitioners. This process involved a whole range of trusted peers, bosses, subordinates, mentors, role models and confidential advisers recruited via their extensive personal networks. It also included personal friends and family members with relevant experience and expertise.

“Talking to other people, my peers, just other Heads, about ... (pause) ... you know, what they might do in their approach”.

[O2I4]

“I draw as much from that as I do from the manager I had previous to that, who I totally and utterly respect and still utilise as a mentor”.

[O4I3]

“For me, it was about ... um ... asking colleagues basically. It was about finding people who’d been similar situations and saying, “How have you handled this?”

[O2I1]

“I tap into my network both internally within the company and also externally within the suppliers and within the customer base”.

[O4I2]

“That’s where networking came in. I know a lot of people, *[and it was]* worth its weight in gold, you know, it really was”.

[O3I4]

“You know a lot of people and ... um ... so you can find out what other people have done”.

[O5I2]

However, some of the interviewees provided evidence that the more formal, more academic ideas, theories, concepts and models had retrospectively provided confirmatory support for some of their previously established practices.

“I think the theories are, I think they’ve been useful in confirming what a lot of my ideas are”.

[O3I5]

“I did the *[name of academic course omitted]*, many years ago, and thought “Oh yeah, I understand that now”.

[O3I1]

“I am a product, I suppose, of academic stuff which was very interesting and it didn’t really teach me an awful lot, but you think, “Ah yeah, ... right, ... yeah, ... Oh that makes sense now” ... and I’ve always sort of thought that, but now there’s like a confirmatory science behind it”.

[O3I4]

Inevitably there were some exceptions to these general discoveries. However, it is important to state that these exceptions were provided by a small minority of the interviewees who were typically able to provide details of a single exceptional instance over an entire career in management. These exceptions involved (i) either personal or institutional barriers that effectively prevented the kind of widespread consultation that otherwise would have occurred; (ii) the coincidental attendance at either an educational or a training event, where relevant and useful material happened to be presented; (iii) the use of models in a metaphorical way to describe significant organisational change; and (iv) the use of a limited range of ‘approved’ models by an individual whose organisational role included supporting ‘agreed’ managerial ‘norms’.

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Thus, even in relation to the interviewees' most significant challenges it was wholly exceptional and genuinely rare for these interviewees to overtly consult academic theory. In fact it was so rare that the overwhelming majority of these interviewees were unable to identify a single occasion, over an entire career, when they had done so.

When asked to explain the apparently highly limited role that the formal, more academic ideas, theories, concepts and models had played, in helping them to address their most significant challenges; a minority of the interviewees suggested that the influence 'must' be covert, indirect, subconscious, or even subliminal. This proposition was examined by a subsequent stage of the research that involved an 'intertextual' analysis of the verbatim interview transcripts, using the framework analysis technique.

The 'intertextual' analysis of the interview transcripts concluded that, the discourse, dialogue and language of the interviewees, could be indexed to four 'domains': the theoretical, the conceptual, the tactical and the practical. These four domains emerged from a process of consolidation that was part of the data analysis, undertaken utilising the framework analysis technique. The result of this indexing is shown in Table 2 below. For the sake of convenience, within each of the four domains, the interview extracts have been listed in alphabetical order.

Table 2 : Intertextual Analysis

<b>Theoretical Domain</b>	<b>Conceptual Domain</b>	<b>Tactical Domain</b>	<b>Practical Domain</b>
Theories & Models	Concepts & Ideas	Approaches & Behaviours	Tools & Techniques
Action centred leadership	Accountable	Abdicate	Action plan
Aggressive	Ambition	Adapt	Agenda
Best value	Authority	Arrogant	Benchmarking
Bureaucracy	Best practice	Autocratic	Body language
Centre of gravity	Busking	Bullying	Budget
Centres of excellence	Champion	Charismatic	Business plan
Completer - finisher	Change agent	Coaching	Checklist
Culture	Confidentiality	Compromise	Decision tree
Ego	Contingency	Consult	Delegation
Emotional intelligence	Core business	Cynical	Gap analysis
Encouraging the heart	Cross - fertilise	Debate	Implementation plan
Energy	Cross cutting	Direct	Job description
Evolution	Devolved	Explore	KPI
Focal point	Diverse	Facilitate	Managing by exception
Group dynamics	Dotted line manager	Goal setting	Manpower planning
Inertia	Dumped on	Influence	Mystery shopping
ISO 9001 accreditation	Empowerment	Instinct	Objective
Lean organisation	Entrepreneurial	Internalise	Prioritise
Learning styles	Ethic	Logical	Process mapping
Matrix organisation	Expedient	Maverick	Risk management
Momentum	Global footprint	Mediation	Schedule
Myers Briggs type indicator	Headhunted	Naïve	Scorecard

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NLP	Hierarchy	Navel gazing	Service level agreement
Osmosis	Inclusive	Negotiate	Stakeholder
Pivotal point	Integrity	Obsequious	Succession planning
Prince two	Invest	Persuade	Target
Situational leadership	Managing up	Pig headed	Terms of reference
Storming	Morale	Reactive	To do lists
Strategic planning	Pace	Refining	
Supply chain	Pathfinder	Segment	
Team briefing	Pride / Proud	Sensible	
Transactional analysis	Privileged	Shock	
Waves	Proactively	Smart arse	
	Professional	Soul searching	
	Quick & dirty	Systematic	
	Red herring	Top down / Bottom up	
	Rites of passage	Turnkey	
	Shadowing	Twiddling their thumbs	
	Silo	Vociferous	
	Sound bite	Working group	
	Sounding board	Workshop	
	Step up to the plate		
	Success		
	Synergies		
	Touch points		
	Touching base		
	Tunnel vision		
	Vertically integrated		
	Watchdog		
	Whinge - fests		

The ‘intertextual’ indexing of the interview extracts to the ‘conceptual domain’ was subsequently corroborated by substantial passages of the verbatim interview transcripts. These demonstrated that it was rare for managers, when explaining their approach to dealing with an issue, to explicitly refer to either a particular theoretician, or a particular theory. In addition, it was equally rare for a manager to attempt to either refer to, or to describe a particular management model. Interestingly this finding held true, even where there was a strong organisational ‘agreement’ to particular managerial ‘norms’. Indeed, this finding even held true in an organisation that had, for example, adopted a particular model of leadership with the strong personal endorsement of a new Chief Executive!

However, if the narrative of the interviewees’ decision making explanations are analysed, it becomes clear that, in fact, the interviewees had a good informal understanding of the theoretical models that were relevant to the challenges that they were discussing. Thus, the inability of an interviewee to ‘name’ either a theory or a theoretician should not be taken to imply their failure to understand the relevant theory in a more generalised, more abstracted way. In the extracts that are reproduced below the interviewees clearly demonstrate an understanding of the proposition that

managerial effectiveness is enhanced when the practitioner adopts a flexible approach that is dependent upon the individual; the nature of the challenges that are being faced; and the wider organisational circumstances.

“So the managerial challenges have been taking them by the hand and leading them through this and trying to get their trust and their will, goodwill, but also getting them actually to start performing, start doing some tasks, and I’m still having ... um ... what I’d call a reasonably serious challenge with one particular individual who is digging heels in a little. I still think some of that is about ... um ... that individual’s personal panic, so I’ve got some work to do in terms of coaching that person, ... um ... but its now bordering on an issue for me, in terms of OK, perhaps I need to get a little bit less soft (laugh) and start ... um ... performance managing”.

[O1I2]

“I have people on my team that are experienced, one of them is a manager of people, ... er ... and there’s only one person on my team that is what we call a junior person because she’s a placement student. So OK, with her, I have to have a slightly different approach, more direct and a lot more close coaching, because that’s what she needs, but some of the other, other people on my team, that’s not what they need, because of their experience. Um ... so that’s made me a little bit, you know, trying to think of what would be the best approach with them and the key for me is I have, I have to listen to what they have to say. A top down approach doesn’t work with a lot of the people I work with”.

[O4I1]

However, what is interesting is that these interviewees could easily have referred to the theoreticians Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard, and their model of ‘situational leadership’. However, they did not do so.

In addition, there is evidence to indicate that managers, attending lectures during the course of their part-time MBA studies, adopt behaviours that are consistent with this kind of more indicative understanding. It would appear that once these individuals have grasped the ‘gist’ of any theoretical input, their attention turns to both the implications of the new information and the potential implementation issues. Indeed the evidence is that this occurs to the point that they stop listening to the rest of the lecture!

In the section of verbatim transcript that is reproduced below the interviewee draws attention to the fact that whilst ‘certain lecturers at college enthuse about certain writers’, she is more interested in ‘looking at the wider picture’ and in ‘understanding concepts’, because she knows that these are what will ‘take her forward’.

“Whilst there are many theorists out there, with many theories, but ... they all support practice. So I’m not, ... I’m, ... I wouldn’t think that I draw on

anybody in particular in terms of what I would ... you know, leadership or anything like that. But, ... what, ... what takes me forward is the understanding of the concepts. Erm, ... and, ... but also being able to look at, ... look at, ... look at them and say, 'Yes that fits in with what I am trying to do, but doesn't necessarily completely fit in'. I might have to draw on somebody else's theory to support that, ... and whilst, you know, ... um ... certain lecturers at college enthuse about certain writers, you know, I'm very much more about looking at the wider picture ... and picking out, ... what's good, what's good for me to use at that particular time. And I'm not, ... I'm not a big model person, ... erm ... my brain doesn't really think in models, as such, ... I don't think".

[M2H3]

In the light of both the outcomes of the 'intertextual' indexing and the corroboration of this more broadly based data analysis, it has been concluded (i) that management can be characterised as a 'conceptual' discipline; (ii) that it is at least as 'conceptual', as it is either 'theoretical' or 'practical'; and (iii) that at the heart of the management experience is the appropriation of ideas and concepts, rather than theories and models.

## Discussion

The findings of this research regarding the prevalence of experience based decision – making is consistent with the established scholarship relating to decision - making in high intensity, operational situations such as fire fighting. This scholarship suggests that experienced individuals, unlike novices, utilise 'recognition primed decision – making' (Klein, 1993). This involves firstly expert diagnosis; then the retrieval of memory based response options and finally the rapid evaluation of these to identify a single response with the best prospects of succeeding.

In addition, the scholarship regarding the realities of the managerial experience has concluded that management can be characterised as a high stimulus, rapid response environment that is fragmental, demanding, pressurised, time constrained and hectic (Mintzberg, 1973; Mintzberg, 1989; Stewart, 1983). Accordingly this would suggest that the adoption of 'recognition primed decision – making' would be a rational recourse for the generality of management practitioners and not just 'fire ground commanders'.

Furthermore, these findings are consistent with more broadly based, established scholarship which suggests that, for all adult homo sapiens, scripts, schemes, frames, traces and schema provide a schematic store of life experiences (Bartlett, 1932; Koffka, 1935, Abelson, 1976; Schank & Abelson, 1997; Minsky, 1975) and that these provide the 'trustworthy recipes' that enable adults to handle many situations without the need for overt thinking (Schutz, 1964).

Other similarly broadly based, established scholarship relating to human memory systems suggests that for homo sapiens the elaboration, encoding and consolidation of experiences is a key factor in both the effective storage and the subsequent retrieval of memories ( Craik & Tulving, 1975). In addition, this scholarship suggests that the

human memory is an 'adaptive system', which is selective in the level of detail that it both stores and retrieves. An example of this is 'transience' (Schacter, 2001). This adaptive feature removes from the active memory information that is no longer required. Thus, most individuals have no reason to remember the registration numbers of every car they have ever owned and so most people don't. As the time between each instance of retrieval increases, it becomes harder to recall the information. In effect, the human memory system 'gambles' that the un-retrieved information is no longer relevant. This highly advantageous adaptation works in our favour most of the time. Occasionally, as occurs when we meet someone we haven't seen for many years and we can't remember their name, this adaptive 'gamble' works against us!

Equally, the adaptation of 'non-literal categorisation' is utilised when someone names a particular breed of bird (Schacter, 2001). In order to do this the individual needs to notice and draw from their memory the recurring features that unite all birds and to ignore all the idiosyncratic details that differentiate particular breeds.

Similarly, the development of a 'gist' based memory system enables human beings to generalise in a meaningful way. It also frees them from a deluge of trivial facts (Schacter, 2001). In addition, a 'gist' based memory system provides humans with the ability to see the patterns that provide a broader, more strategic picture. Indeed the study of chess players has shown that the key difference, between an experienced Grand Master and a novice chess player, is the ability of the former to achieve high levels of abstraction; to detect groupings that are significant; and to develop a strategic analysis from the confusion of the positions occupied by the individual chess pieces (Hofstadter, 2001).

Thus, an individual's ability to conceptualise, to form abstractions and to grasp the 'gist' of information, rather than to focus upon the details, would appear to be some of the essential pre-requisites to appreciating both its relevance and the breadth of its potential applicability. Similarly, the ability to elaborate, encode and 'chunk' information would appear to be some of the essential pre-requisites for both connecting new information to existing data stores and for organising data into higher levels of strategic meaning.

Hence, this more broadly based scholarship regarding 'adaptive' memory systems provides a powerful rationale for why management practitioners might be better served by a 'gist' based understanding of the more formal, more academic theories and models about management, than that which might be provided by perfect recall.

## **Limitations**

The most obvious limitation of this research is its dependence upon the retrospective explanations provided by managers and prudence would suggest that it might be wise for these discoveries to be corroborated by an appropriately designed ethnographic study.

In addition, although the initial cohort of interviewees was provided by organisations from the public, the private, the not for profit and the charitable sectors of the economy; all but one of the organisations were located in the West Midlands. Accordingly care



needs to be exercised in relation to any implied assumption that, for example, the nature of the economy in this region is typical of the whole of the UK. Similarly, all but one of the members of the cohort of part time MBA interviewees was drawn from the same academic institution, which utilised the fairly standard teaching methods. These included lectures, case studies, delegate discussions, personal study and assignments. Accordingly care needs to be exercised in relation to any implied assumption that the learning experiences of these part time MBA students are typical of MBA students from the whole of the UK, particularly where institutions may be using widely different course structures, such as distance learning.

Accordingly this research has utilised 'theoretical' generalisation (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003: 264) to make wider inferences of the more general applicability of the insights that have been obtained.

### **Further work**

A clear implication of the recent Hodgkinson, Langan-Fox & Sadler-Smith (2008) journal article regarding 'intuition' is that in the long term a definitive and comprehensive understanding of the mental processes that lie behind the kind of 'chunking', 'gisting', encoding and elaboration that have been described; probably lies with social cognitive neuroscience and functional magnetic resonance imaging.

However, the key discoveries of this research could be and perhaps should be enhanced, developed and clarified; or simply subjected to further scrutiny and verification.

In addition, subsequent work might focus upon the central proposition that, in so far as theory is appropriated at all, it is appropriated in a conceptual, abstracted and 'gisted' form and that the process of elaboration and encoding would appear to be fundamental to this outcome. Accordingly, any further work might seek to focus upon firstly the role that is played by the chaotic and highly intrusive processes of personal reflection and secondly the extent to which the ability to conceptualise may vary across a broad spectrum of management practitioners.

### **Implications for professional practice**

The key discoveries of this research would appear to have significant implications for research, teaching, learning and practice.

Firstly, the continuing discussions regarding rigour versus relevance and theory versus practice would appear to become less significant. Indeed, an implication of this research is that the relevant image is not that of the extreme polarities of either rigour, or relevance; or even that of theory or practice; but rather that of a middle ground of conceptualising, abstracting and 'gisting'. A corollary of this is that researchers and educators could be reassured that their key task was not to impart a detailed and long lasting knowledge of theory and models per se; but rather to facilitate the identification of the abstractions and concepts that underpin these theories and models. It is these that are likely to form the basis of the more portable 'ideas and concepts' to which

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practitioners might refer when confronted by their most significant managerial challenges.

Equally, practitioners could be reassured that their key task was not to appropriate theory and models per se, but that neither was to simply acquire a range of tools and techniques, even though these would inevitably form an important aspect of their managerial competence. However, they could be encouraged to understand that a key aspect of their professional calling was to participate in the difficult, relentless, lifelong task of conceptualising, abstracting, ‘gisting’, elaborating, encoding and ‘chunking’ that appears to underpin the critical process of ‘building up a giant repertoire of concepts in the mind’ (Hofstadter, 2001: 500).

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